

(Washington, DC)— Congresswoman Gwen Moore expressed support for today's passage of legislation that would ease the nation's passport crisis by hiring experienced former State Department employees to handle a severe backlog of passport applications.

Due to inadequate preparation, the State Department is experiencing a severe logjam in processing passport applications, forcing citizens across the nation to lose millions of dollars in canceled or delayed vacations. This legislation would lessen the workload by allowing the State Department to recruit and hire Foreign Service retirees to assist in processing passport and visa applications.

"It is unacceptable that this Administration did not have the foresight to prepare for a highly anticipated influx of passport applications for travel to our bordering countries and beyond. My Congressional office has been working diligently with State Department personnel to try to help solve passport problems for travelers throughout Milwaukee," Congresswoman Gwen Moore said. "This bill would help ease the backlog and speed up the process so that Milwaukee travelers can go on their vacations without any worries."

There was a sharp, but expected, rise in passport applications following the implementation of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative on January 23, 2007, which requires U.S. citizens traveling to Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Bermuda by air to have a passport.

The passport problem has had a negative impact on the entire nation. Passports that were typically processed in 4-6 weeks now are taking an average of 12 weeks and some 500,000 passport applications have taken over 12 weeks. The backlog has caused increased casework for Congressional offices nationwide, as they grapple with solving the problem.

LEGISLATION FACTS:

S. 966 will provide an additional tool to the Department of State, enabling it to recruit and hire Foreign Service retirees in order to assist in the processing of passport applications, as well as with visa applications at overseas posts with a substantial backlog of such applications. Because many Foreign Service retirees are already trained for these functions, and have the requisite security clearances, they can be hired and assigned to duty in a short time period.

Under the Foreign Service Act of 1980, Foreign Service retirees may continue to receive their pension payments while employed for the federal government; but they may do so only for six months of the year, or until they reach a salary cap (which relates to a number of factors personal to the retiree).

S. 966 will permit the Secretary of State to waive these limitations in order to permit Foreign Service retirees to work during the entire year without foregoing their pension payments, in two circumstances: (1) in order to provide assistance to consular posts with a substantial backlog of visa applications; or (2) to provide assistance to meet the passport and travel document demand resulting from the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative.

This authority is granted until September 30, 2010.

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